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COUNTY TO SEND INMATES TO FIRE CAMPS

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By Abby Sewell and Seema Mehta

LA Times

Los Angeles County supervisors have agreed to shift more than 500 inmates to mountain-area firefighting camps across the region in a bid to ease jail crowding and increase the amount of time serious criminal offenders remain behind bars.

The move marks the latest attempt by county officials to deal with the effects of a federal court order that forced California to reduce its prison population. Under so-called realignment, California officials are redirecting lower-level felons to local lockups, which has swelled the county's jail population and caused some local inmates to be released long before they finish their sentences.

A Times analysis last month found that the Sheriff's Department has released more than 23,000 inmates early this year — including some accused of violent crimes and sex offenses — a sharp increase over previous years.

Some criminals sentenced to county jail for violent or sexual offenses now are serving just 40% of their jail terms, records show. Lower-level offenders serve even smaller portions of their sentences.

State prisoners sent to county jails are not eligible for early release. As a result, they now account for about one-third of the L.A. County jail population and several county lockups are significantly over capacity.

[See Jails, A11]

County to pay $27 million for shift

[Jails, from A1]

With Tuesday's action, qualifying state inmates will be eligible to serve time at five fire camps jointly run by the county Fire Department and the state prison system. The camps have traditionally housed state inmates, but their use decreased under the realignment program.

County supervisors agreed to pay the state $27 million to house 528 inmates at the camps over the next three years. That will free up beds so more county inmates serve longer sentences, officials said.

The camps are located in mountain and foothill areas throughout the county, including near Acton, Malibu and in the Angeles National Forest. Inmates assigned to the camps must be nonviolent offenders and complete physical and security screening. They will be trained by county firefighters to help fight fires and assist with clearing debris from flood control basins.

CHERYL A. GUERRERO Los Angeles Times

JEAN THAXTON, center left, and other supporters of creating a permanent citizens commission to oversee the Sheriff's Department attend Tuesday's meeting of the L.A. County supervisors, who postponed the vote.

In exchange, the inmates will be able to earn extra credit and shorten their sentences. State corrections officers provide security at the camps, but periodically inmates have escaped.

In addition to grappling with the effects of realignment, county officials are facing federal investigations of alleged inmate abuse and inadequate mental health treatment in the jails. Eventually, the county Board of Supervisors and Sheriff Lee Baca hope to rebuild the aging Men's Central Jail and overhaul other facilities, an ambitious improvement program with an expected price tag of more than $1 billion.

In the interim, sending inmates to fire camps is the most cost-effective way to curb early releases of inmates, officials said.

The county also has explored sending inmates to a Kern County correctional facility run by the city of Taft. Supervisors Michael D. Antonovich and Don Knabe asked county staff to bring back to the board a proposed $11.3-million-a-year contract with Taft for 500 prison beds in two weeks.

"The jail system is one of the ways in which the county fulfills its obligation to protect the safety of its citizens," Knabe and Antonovich wrote. "Releasing serious and violent inmates into the community early dilutes justice for the victims and undermines the justice system as a whole."

Dozens of people at Tuesday's county board meeting voiced opposition to spending more money on prison beds, saying incarceration was a failed policy that disproportionately affects poor and minority communities and fails to address the causes of crime.

They urged more focus on prevention and diversion programs and releasing more inmates who are awaiting trial.

"We need to be looking at how to get people into community programs rather than looking at how to retain [offenders] as long as possible," said Mark-Anthony Johnson, an activist with Coalition to End Sheriff's Violence in L.A. Jails.

Peter Eliasberg, the legal director of ACLU of Southern California, reminded supervisors that the county faced federal scrutiny over the treatment of mentally ill prisoners in the 1990s and built what was then billed as a "state-of-the-art" jail, known as Twin Towers. The massive jail proved to be "a disaster," Eliasberg said.

"It didn't work last time, and it's not going to work this time," Eliasberg said. The best solution would be to remove nonviolent prisoners with mental illness who did not commit sexual crimes "out of the jails and into community-based treatment," he said.

The supervisors also postponed a vote on a proposal to set up a permanent citizens commission to oversee the Sheriff's Department.

The proponents, Supervisors Gloria Molina and Mark Ridley-Thomas, argued that an added layer of oversight is needed in light of "continued allegations of excessive force, significant litigation costs and a moral imperative to ensure constitutional policing in the county's jails and communities." Molina said the county had paid out $37 million in lawsuit settlements relating to the Sheriff's Department in the 2012 fiscal year and $25 million in the first half of the 2013 fiscal year.

But Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Knabe said establishing a permanent citizens' commission was premature. The board should focus on setting up an inspector general's office for the department as recently recommended by a blue-ribbon commission of retired judges and others who reviewed issues of jail violence.

The supervisors agreed to hire an inspector general for the Sheriff's Department nearly a year ago. But it wasn't until Tuesday that they voted to create a committee to review the qualifications of potential candidates.

The proposal to create an oversight commission is slated to return to the board Oct. 8. A majority of board members expressed opposition to the proposal, but Ridley-Thomas' spokeswoman, Lisa Richardson, said "behind-the-scenes developments, particularly with regard to the U.S. Department of Justice ... within the next few weeks, could result in increased support for [a permanent] commission."

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L.A. JAILS

County is pushing for more oversight

Proposal: Citizens commission rejected; inspector general search stepped up

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Saying the troubled Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department should be placed under greater scrutiny, the county Board of Supervisors stepped up its search for an inspector general Tuesday but stopped short of creating a proposed citizens oversight commission.

Also Tuesday, the board voted to ease overcrowding in local jails by sending 500 low-risk inmates to camps where they can be pressed into service by the Fire Department.

Next week, the board will consider transferring 500 other inmates — those with the longest sentences — to a municipal jail in Taft, Kern County.

With the LASD under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice over excessive use of force and other misconduct in jails, and alleged civil rights violations of mentally ill inmates as well as minority recipients of federal housing assistance in the Antelope Valley, Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Gloria Molina urged colleagues to appoint an oversight commission.

"It ought to be seen as a tool that can assist in ensuring modern constitutional policing and to build public trust," Ridley-Thomas said.

But Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Don Knabe noted such a body cannot have any substantive legal authority over the sheriff, an elected official.

"All this would do is create another soapbox that will have, at the end of the day, a lot of activity but no achievement," Yaroslavsky said.

The board postponed voting until next month and instead created a committee to vet inspector general candidates.

The blue-ribbon Commission on Jail Violence had recommended hiring an inspector general almost a year ago, but a headhunter failed to find suitable candidates.

American Civil Liberties Union for Southern California legal director Peter Eliasberg said the county wasted a lot of time by turning to a headhunter instead of consulting the public.

"They spent months going down that road, and paid that headhunter a boatload of money," he said.

Patrisse Cullors, founder of the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence, said the need for an inspector general is "urgent."

"I'm definitely frustrated, mostly because there hasn't been a lot of transparency (with a headhunter in charge of the search)."

The committee created Tuesday includes retired judges and civil rights leaders.

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LATIMES.COM

A chronic shortage of love

Even though the number of children in L.A. County foster care has been declining, there are still not enough homes for those in need

SANDY BANKS

The Los Angeles County foster care system has a new crisis — one that can't be resolved by yanking children from troubled parents.

In fact, more children in the system would only make things worse because there's nowhere to put them in a county that has run out of beds in foster homes.

The shortage has been a perennial problem, but it reached crisis level this summer because of an uptick in child abuse reports after the death of an Antelope Valley boy who'd been left with a mother accused of neglect. She has been charged with murdering her son.

The lack of foster homes means traumatized children removed from their parents are often crammed into temporary quarters where toddlers can spend hours in dirty diapers and teenagers sometimes have to sleep on the floor.

"We can't even find placements for newborns," social worker Nancy Razo told me. The lack of a computerized tracking process means it can take a social worker a hundred phone calls to find a bed for a single child.

The number of children in foster care has been dropping over the years, so the shortfall surprised me. Foster parents are the linchpin of the child welfare system, but most of us don't know much about what their role involves.

We hear about horror stories and saintly extremes: The Palmdale foster mother accused of beating and torturing her children. Or the Camarillo family whose love helped six disabled children grow into happy and productive adults.

But it's the thousands of people in the middle that make the system run. So I joined dozens of prospective parents at an orientation this week, to try to understand what draws them in and what drives them off.

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The crowd at the South Los Angeles community center was heavy on retirees and people in the helping professions: nurses, child care workers, teachers. Some were familiar with the process; they'd begun and backed out before. Others were drawn by news accounts of the shortage or appeals at church.

Many were surprised by the lengthy process — home inspections, background checks, six weeks of parenting classes — but heartened by the bottom line: *They're children. Love them and you'll do fine.*

Some, like Rochel Disi, grew up in a family that cared for foster children. The drug-addicted newborn she helped raise is now 28 and dancing on a Broadway stage. Disi, who runs a preschool, is now an empty nester. "I'm separated from my husband. My children are gone. What's good for me," she said, "is more kids in my home."

She understands the tightrope that foster parents walk, caring for children who are likely — in weeks or months or years — to go back to their parents. "I see this as helping the children and their mothers," Disi said. "You can't go into it saying 'This is going to be my child.' "

The push by the county to reunite children with their families is blamed by some for reducing the number of foster parents. In the past, many regarded fostering as a route to adoption. Now they worry that a child they've grown to love will be reclaimed.

The three-hour orientation was packed with advice on how to prepare for a home inspection (gates on the stairway, no clutter in the house or yard) and how to welcome children (ask about their favorite foods, help them unpack).

Foster care officials didn't hide the downsides. Raising someone else's child can be costly, demanding and frustrating.

Foster parents are reimbursed with monthly stipends — ranging from $680 for a healthy infant to almost $1,400 for a teenager with medical or emotional problems — but they often wind up digging into their own pockets.

"Don't look at the money," warned Cora Pearson, a foster mother for 37 years. "You are going to work for every penny. Just focus on keeping the children happy. Just treat them like your own."

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That's harder than it sounds. Some children struggle with the sudden separation from parents; others are angry after cycling through several foster homes.

"When a kid comes to you, they don't know you, they don't trust you," said Connie Keith, a foster mother for 23 years. "You've got to be able reach out to that kid and bond."

A retired accountant, she stumbled into foster parenting when she took in a 4-year-old niece who had been abandoned. She had to go to court to formalize the arrangement. "My heart just melted when I looked around and saw all those kids who were going through what she was.... I knew I could help," Keith said.

She still has two of her

foster children — a 21-year-old she's raised since he was 4 and a 20-year-old who came to her when he was 13. "They have no family. I'm it," she said. "And I'm glad to be here for them."

It's been a rewarding experience, she said. But she understands why there's a shortage. The process can be capricious and is notoriously intrusive.

"A lot of people do not like social workers coming into their homes, getting into their personal business," said Keith, who heads the San Gabriel Valley foster parents association.

Others feel ambushed by children's needs and problems. "You get very little information on your child right away," Keith said. "Social workers don't always know much about the background."

And Keith said some parents suffer when a foster child doesn't fit in with their family. "Sometimes you try and it doesn't work out, and it's hard to let that child go back to social workers. You feel guilty about that."

The upside, she said, is harder to tally in a checklist.

"This child comes into your home so sad and downcast, and you can bring a smile to their face. That really does something to you. It's beyond calculation, the sense of joy that brings."

Information about becoming a foster parent can be found at www.shareyourheartla.org.

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Editorial

New trouble, old questions for L.A. sheriff

Sheriff Lee Baca was making such progress on the toughest rehabilitation job in the Los Angeles County criminal justice system — the rehabilitation of his own reputation.

So it's especially disturbing to learn that after a lot of encouraging talk and apparent effort, Baca and his deputies are facing a new round of investigations into accusations of abuse of inmates and inadequate care for the mentally ill in the L.A. County jail system.

This isn't going to help Baca in his stated goal of winning election to a fifth term next year, and it may lengthen the line of intended challengers that already includes two former subordinates.

Word of the new federal investigation came in a letter last week from the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division to L.A. County officials, the Los Angeles Times reported.

That ended a string of more positive headlines about the Sheriff's Department. Late last month, the head of the county's independent Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence told the Board of Supervisors the department was making good progress in its effort to change a culture of violence in the jail system. The supervisors were told more work was needed — along with millions more dollars in county expense on jail improvements — but the department had fully implemented most of the panel's recommendations and was gaining ground with the rest.

This editorial board was encouraged, too, by what it heard when Baca came to visit in March to outline his responses to the scandals that have dogged him. No longer passing the blame to underlings, Baca admitted that the American Civil Liberties Union had been correct with much of its criticism in a report alleging brutal treatment of jail inmates by deputies. In addition to firing some deputies and guards for failing to meet a code of conduct, he seemed to be trying to get to the systematic roots of the problem.

At the time, the Sheriff's Department was in the middle of an FBI investigation of jail abuse allegations. That federal probe is still going on, and now another, separate one is beginning. The Justice Department's letter to the county said "significant problems remain," it was reported.

Implementing all of the recommendations of the Citizens' Commission, including the installation of closed-circuit cameras and scanners in jails and rotating jail personnel to prevent cliques from developing, will take time and money and the right people in charge.

Baca confirmed at a recent speech in Long Beach that, despite it all, he means to go ahead and run for re-election next June, when he will be 72. Candidates planning to challenge him include Bob Olmsted, a retired sheriff's commander who was among the first in the department to publicly blame Baca's management for the scandals, and Paul Tanaka, the ousted undersheriff who may bear his own share of responsibility for the problems.

That day in Long Beach, Baca tried to answer criticisms, including the allegations that cliques of deputies in the L.A. Central Jail regularly beat inmates. "You can't blame an organization of 18,000 for the bad conduct of a few," Baca said.

But the question before the public isn't the performance of the 18,000 men and women in the department, it's the leadership of the man at the top.

Baca no doubt hoped to put that question behind him before facing the voters. Time is running out.